

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
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Waterfowl Population Estimates
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake

Date: Coastal Zone: November 7 & 8, 2006,
Catahoula Lake & NE Louisiana:
November 3, Northwest Louisiana:
November 2

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November 15, 2006

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Estimates made from Aircraft (*) Estimate less than 1,000

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	47,000	2,000	*	49,000
MOTTLED	48,000	19,000		67,000
GADWALL	960,000	389,000	*	1,349,000
WIGEON	23,000	28,000	*	51,000
GW TEAL	127,000	34,000	*	161,000
BW TEAL	89,000	10,000		99,000
SHOVELER	208,000	47,000	*	255,000
PINTAIL	68,000	26,000	1,000	95,000
TOTAL DABLERS	1,570,000	555,000	1,000	2,126,000
SCAUP	1,000	10,000	1,000	12,000
RINGNECKED	18,000	33,000	74,000	125,000
CANVASBACK	4,000		37,000	41,000
TOTAL DIVERS	23,000	43,000	112,000	178,000
TOTAL DUCKS	1,593,000	598,000	113,000	2,304,000
COOTS	213,000	360,000	1,000	574,000

COMMENTS:

The estimate of 2.3 million ducks on this survey is nearly 80% higher than last November's estimate of 1.3 million and is similar to the 30-year average of 2.2 million. Estimates for all species except pintails and green-winged teal were higher than last year, and although most species were below long-term averages, above-average estimates for gadwalls, shovelers, ring-necked ducks and canvasbacks pushed the total over the long-term mark. Total duck numbers in southeast Louisiana and Catahoula Lake were similar to last year, but estimates for southwest Louisiana were nearly 2.5 times higher than last November.

An additional 316,000 ducks and 214,000 geese were counted in selected habitats of northeast Louisiana. That is nearly 3 times higher than the highest number of ducks counted on any northeast Louisiana survey last year when relatively little habitat was available due to very dry conditions. Pintails (114,000), gadwalls (60,000), mallards (59,000), and green-winged teal (42,000) were the most abundant duck species, while snow geese (149,000) accounted for 70% of the geese counted.

We counted another 21,000 ducks on our northwest Louisiana survey, primarily on the locks, lakes, oxbows, and fields along the Red River and upper Toledo Bend reservoir. This is much higher than the 12,000 counted in November of 2005 and 4,000 counted in 2004. Gadwalls (10,000), mallards (6,000), green-winged teal (3,000), and canvasbacks (2,000) were the most abundant species.

All evidence points to an earlier migration of ducks into Louisiana compared to 5 of the prior 6 years. Since 1999, only the November survey in 2002 estimated more ducks (2.6 million) than this year. A number of cold fronts, starting in September and culminating in a strong cold-air movement the first week of November, brought birds into the state. By October 31, Minnesota was reporting substantial ice coverage of wetland habitat and ducks migrating out of the state. Ice has persisted in Minnesota and similar reports of ice coverage and birds moving out of the Dakotas indicate conditions favorable to birds moving into southern states, including Louisiana.

Much of Louisiana was in tightening drought status through early-October with limited wetlands outside of the coastal zone. Several regions of the state were 15-20 inches below average precipitation at that time. Because October is normally our driest month, we were anticipating another dry winter. However, that changed abruptly during the latter half of October. A series of cold fronts produced an abundance of rain over most of the state except the southeast. Daily rainfall totals exceeding 13 inches occurred in central Louisiana, and 2-week totals of 12-15 inches were common across much of the state. This resulted in an abundance of flooded agricultural fields and near-flood conditions in some natural wetlands.

Habitat conditions in northeast Louisiana improved greatly as October rainfall put water in backwater wetlands, managed habitats, and many agricultural fields, providing excellent early-season conditions except possibly for Catahoula Lake. Flooding has made foraging habitat there unavailable to dabblers at this time, but the lake is holding over 110,000 diving ducks including 37,000 canvasbacks.

Habitat conditions in coastal Louisiana are highly variable. The westernmost transect lines, including habitat on Sabine NWR that has traditionally held large numbers of ducks, still have large areas of brown, unvegetated marsh and areas where emergent vegetation appears stressed by poor water quality. However, most marshes in southwest Louisiana appear to be recovering from the impacts of Hurricane Rita. Many areas showed outstanding growth of moist-soil plants in September, primarily wild millet, pigweed, and flat-sedges, which are now flooded and available for waterfowl foraging. Unfortunately, water-levels of 1 to 2 feet above normal have flooded much of that marsh deeper than desired for feeding waterfowl. In general, the variability in habitat conditions may have led to a clumpy distribution of ducks. We seemed to fly long stretches of marsh with few ducks then encountered large concentrations in discrete locations.

Similarly, southeast Louisiana marshes are showing signs of recovery from last year's hurricane damage. Good growth of submerged aquatic vegetation was seen at both Atchafalaya and Mississippi River deltas as well as in the marsh around Delacroix. The habitat conditions in the upper Terrebonne basin and around Lake Salvador also look good despite those areas holding far fewer ducks than at this time last year, when they were the only areas not severely impacted by the storms.

